

More significant role for Jakim

LETTERS

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RECENTLY, there was an outcry among the public when the new federal government announced that the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (Jakim) would be reviewed. Given that Jakim has been receiving a hefty share of the national budget, many have raised their concerns on its performance as well as given suggestions on its role in the new Malaysia.

In this regard, I think Jakim could play a significant role if it focuses on the prevention of wrongdoings committed in the public domain rather than private affairs of individuals.

The mufti of Perlis, Datuk Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, elaborated that there are two types of sins based on their evil consequences. The first type is private sins, such as adultery, intoxication and gambling that are committed by individuals in their private spheres. Private sins would damage the relationship between individuals and God and would harm oneself only.

The second type refers to public sins committed in the public domain that would harm others, such as corruption, power abuse, breach of trust, robbery and stealing, rape, drug trafficking, and spreading lies in the name of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

From the historical narratives of Prophet Muhammad, we could see that He was reluctant to punish private sinners but was harsh and swift upon those who committed wrongdoings that harm public interests. The Quran even reminds Muslims not to spy on others' private life!

Former deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki had also talked about this division between private and public sins a few years ago but it didn't trigger any change in Jakim's direction.

As a public institution that is funded by taxpayers, Jakim should realign its focus to develop Islam in Malaysia from being limited to private matters to cover the public domain of society. It should lead the efforts to combat corruption, power abuse and misuse of public funds since these public sins are strongly condemned in Islam and they harm both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Jakim could play a major role to develop a holistic Islamic approach that would guide the reform of public institutions, where the emphasis must be on good governance, transparency and competency. For

a start, Jakim could develop policies to enhance the administration of public religious institutions that are entrusted with public funds such as mosques, waqf and zakat boards.

Jakim should spearhead the efforts to reform the understanding of Islam in the context of Malaysia. Given that human life has changed a lot since the time of the Prophet due to technology and local variations, there is a need to review Islamic laws so that the real objectives of those laws remain intact.

Malaysia is a unique case due to our multiracial social fabric. Hence, Islamic laws must uphold, and must be seen to uphold, justice and inclusive development for all. Jakim could play a huge role in this area, where the establishment of justice could promote a harmonious relationship among all Malaysians.

For example, a peaceful change of government via democracy was never discussed by any classical Muslim scholars in the past, hence there is a need to rewrite political laws according to Islam that suit the local context in Malaysia.

Jakim could also improve its original function of coordinating and developing Islamic education. As highlighted by many classical Muslim scholars, including Al-Ghazali and Al-Shatibi, all religions share a common set of good values.

If given the right direction and opportunity, Islamic education should enhance the process of nurturing good universal values among our schoolchildren.

Besides the usual teaching on ritual practices, Jakim could improve the content of Islamic education by emphasising the importance of achieving those universal values and promoting civic awareness as required by Islam.

As an example, while schoolchildren are being warned of the sins of eating pork or committing adultery, likewise they should be told of the sins of committing and abetting corruption and abuse of power. They should be exposed to the potential dangers and harms of such offences.

In this regard, the Islamic education system should be able to produce good, civic-minded Malaysians.

I personally think that public intrusions into individual private affairs should be kept at a minimum as was practised by the Prophet. Let the numerous NGOs and religious societies play a greater role in the fight against private sins. Since these sins are committed in the private sphere, perhaps the private sector knows better how to handle the situation.

Jakim could contribute a lot by giving the correct understanding to society at large such that they are able to distinguish between private sins and public sins. I believe this is the way forward to make Jakim stay relevant in the new Malaysia.

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